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Topographical History of Charlestown

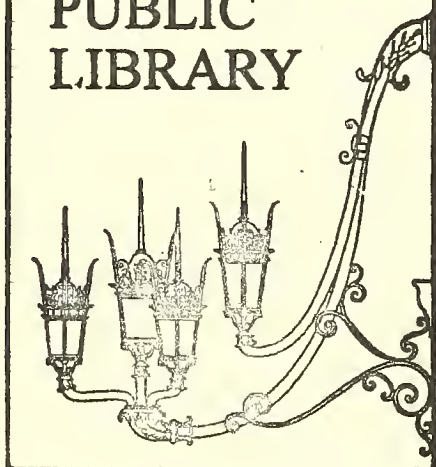
In the 17th century Charlestown was founded on a forested peninsula surrounded by tidal marshes of the Charles and Mystic rivers. The original triangular shape of the peninsula ^{still remains in} ~~now determines~~ the boundaries of the residential section of Charlestown. Medford Street and Rutherford Avenue approximate the edges of the peninsula, converging at Sullivan Square, the location of the narrow neck of land which originally joined the peninsula to the mainland. The hills still dominate views of the town although ^{buildings} ~~structures~~ of different heights obscure some of the earlier contrast between the wooded slopes and lowland marshes.

The colonial town, established in 1629 as the first settlement of the Massachusetts Company, centered around City Square with its open market place. The Square was also the site of the first building constructed in Charlestown, the Great House, a large plain wooden box, which was used as both governor's residence and as a public meeting house (for the First Congregational Church). Thomas Graves, engineer for the Massachusetts Company, laid out streets in the Town Hill area (between City and Thompson squares) following the contours of the land.

In the 18th century the town still centered around City Square where in 1716 the First Congregational Church raised a new frame meeting house with a steeple. The location of the Square near the wharves (to either side of the present ramps to the Charlestown Bridge) made it easily accessible to the Boston ferry and to ships from other ports. A road led to Cambridge along present Main Street. By the time of the Revolutionary War wooden residences clustered along

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Main Street and the Town Hill area (as far as Thompson Square). A few buildings were scattered on Breed's Hill near the Training Field and grouped along the road to Cambridge. Most of the peninsula remained open meadows and woods--some of which was held in common by the town. As Charlestown's original boundaries included parts of modern Woburn, Burlington, Malden, Stoneham, Reading, Medford, Cambridge, Arlington, and Somerville, the main common and several large farms occupied the mainland beyond the Neck.

Charlestown residents actively resisted British oppression in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. In fact, their participation in the Lexington and Concord skirmishes in April 1775 prompted General Gage's threat to burn the town if the rebels raised any defenses on its hills. As a result many residents fled from Charlestown, and political tension increased. In June 1775 the colonial leaders learned of the British intention to take possession of Dorchester Heights on June 18. On the night of June 16, colonial forces under Colonel William Prescott crossed the Charlestown Neck from Cambridge and, passing Bunker Hill, raised a redoubt on Breed's Hill (the site of the present granite monument). The following morning the British discovered the defenses of the patriots and shelled Charlestown while landing troops on Moulton's Point (or Morten's Point, now in the Navy Yard). Despite orders to conserve ammunition and "wait until you see the white of their eyes," the Americans exhausted their powder supply during the third British assault and were forced to retreat along Bunker Hill and across the Neck. Although more reliable supplies of ammunition and reinforcements enabled the British to take possession of the Charlestown hills, they sustained heavy losses and the "Battle of Bunker Hill" established open warfare and the potential threat of the colonial forces. During the battle General Gage

followed through with his threat and set the town afire, destroying the settlement of about 500 predominantly wooden buildings.

The vigorous rebuilding and expansion which followed the Revolutionary War established much of the present character of the area. The fire of 1775 had effectively leveled the town so the returning residents reorganized and straightened a few of the streets, and planned new buildings including a ^{wooden} meeting house ^{for the First Congregational Church} on the top of Town Hill (on the upper part of present Hohn Harvard Mall) with a steeple designed by Charles Bulfinch. Though the removal of a large quantity of gravel lowered the Town Hill at this time, the basic character of its narrow curving streets was not altered. The first houses constructed after the war lined these older streets along the Town Hill and toward the Training Field. The replacement of the Old Ferry by the Charlestown Bridge in 1786 ^{allowed} ~~provided~~ freer communication between the town and Boston.

By the early 19th century Charlestown was no longer limited to a close cluster of buildings attached to City Square and the Town Hill. Bridge and turnpike construction provided approaches to each point of the peninsula, spreading economic and residential activity to different sections -- the Malden Bridge replaced the Penny Ferry across the Mystic River near Charlestown Neck in 1787; the Salem Turnpike (along Chelsea Street) and Chelsea Bridge were completed across the Mystic River to Chelsea in 1803; and the sites for the State Prison and Navy Yards were established in 1800. A slowly increasing population demanded a greater variety of religious facilities, public buildings, and residential development. The residents responded ~~by~~ by subdividing land and constructing buildings. New religious groups joined the Congregationalists with two new churches in 1810 -- the First Baptist Church at the corner of Austin and Lawrence streets (replaced in 1861 by the present building) and a Universalist church.

The Unitarians established a church in 1819, and the Roman Catholics dedicated the first Saint Mary's^{church} in 1829, followed by the Episcopalians' Saint John's Church in 1841 (still standing on Devens Street).

Housing construction spread along new streets between Main and High streets and toward Prison Point. Next, the area north of High and Elm streets to Bunker Hill Street was laid out. This development connected the two sides of the peninsula, while additional bridges (Prison Point^{Bridge} in 1815, and Warren Bridge near the Charlestown Bridge in 1828) strengthened Charlestown's ties to the mainland. Building generally followed short residential streets which conform to the hilly topography and rarely extend more than a few blocks. The steeper slopes of Breed's and Bunker hills remained undeveloped until later.

Although Charlestown's remaining land possessions on the mainland had been annexed to Arlington (then West Cambridge) and Somerville in 1842, the increasing population density within the peninsula led the government to change from town to city form in 1847. The 1852 Charlestown city directory map shows streets covering the entire peninsula from Main Street to the Navy Yards (Chelsea Street) to Medford Street, then at the edge of the Mystic River. This development eliminated the large open areas on the hills and led to more consciously^{developed} defined open spaces.

Some of these open areas such as City Square, the Old Burial Ground (Phipps Street Cemetery), and the Training Field had been established since the first settlement of the town. Nevertheless, the sizes and shapes of these areas were gradually determined as the town grew. For instance, the colonial town had established the Training Field by 1630 to drill troops. However, its location at the edge of the settlement on Breed's Hill left its limits vague. As

streets were laid out first on one side then another during the early 19th century, buildings gradually enclosed the Field. By 1850 the angles of the streets and facades of the buildings determined the size and scale of the space. The Training Field's irregular growth contributes to its informal visual relationship with approaching streets up and down the hill. Present residents use it as a meeting spot and playground.

While the Training Field was being gradually enclosed, the Bunker Hill Monument Association purchased the land around the site of the Revolutionary War fortifications on Breed's Hill. In 1825 the cornerstone was laid for the obelisk designed by the architect, Solomon Willard; and in 1826 ~~an engineer, Gridley Bryant,~~^{he} opened the horsedrawn Granite Railway to carry the granite from the quarry in Quincy. Financial difficulties delayed construction of the obelisk so the top stone was not set until 1843. A formal symmetrical square was laid out so that views along approaching streets, such as Monument Avenue, emphasize the central monument. Row houses in a variety of mid-nineteenth century architectural styles face Monument Square and line Monument Avenue accentuating the formal organization of Monument Square. In contrast to the relaxed atmosphere of the Training Field which appeals to residents of the area, Monument Square attracts tourists with its impressive groomed appearance as a monumental tribute to the "Battle of Bunker Hill."

Early plans show the development of the surrounding residential area as a fashionable district comparable to the Boston developments in the South End and Back Bay, and with streets names like those on Beacon Hill. However, the building did not progress as rapidly as the planners expected. Thus, the design of row houses around the Square varied over the second half of the century and similar residences only extended a short distance to the east (as on Mount Vernon Street).

Whereas English descendants dominated the population of the town in the 1830's, the growth of industry along new land for the railroads and Navy Yard attracted some of Boston's nineteenth century immigrants to Charlestown. By 1860 40% of the population was Irish Catholic, requiring new churches and educational facilities in addition to housing accomodation in three-story wooden buildings. Saint Francis de Sales Church was ~~built~~^{constructed} in 1862 on Bunker Hill; and in 1887 Saint Catherine of Siena Church was built in Hayes Square and a new building for Saint Mary's Church was erected at the corner of Warren and Winthrop streets.

As the original peninsula had been covered with streets, expansion needs were met by land fills off both Medford and Main streets. By mid-century some land extended west of Main Street, especially around Prison Point, but the edge ~~of~~ did not reach Canal Street (now Rutherford Avenue) until the 1870's. By 1885 the land fills joined Lechmere Point on the west, providing land for the Boston and Main Railroad yards, On the north, the boundaries of the Mystic River area appeared by 1862, but only a few wharves extended into the area until the end of the century. During this period Charlestown decided it was too small to function as a separate city, and annexation to Boston was approved as early as 1854. However, balloting problems invalidated the election and delayed annexation until a new vote in 1874.

During the twentieth century increasing industrial activity has spread into residential sections of Charlestown. Buildings near the railroad yards (especially between Rutherford Avenue and Main Street off Thompson Square) and the Elevated transit line (erected in 1901) have particularly suffered from mixture with these non-residential activities. Almost the only new construction has been the Boston Housing Authority project (completed in 1942) which houses one fourth of

Charlestown's present population. The old, narrow streets of Charlestown need repaving in order to serve the neighborhood adequately. Furthermore, traffic patterns have become confused by the intermingling of local and through traffic with the Mystic River Bridge ~~and~~ and its interchanges connecting to the Central Artery in Boston. City Square remains the center of town only in terms of traffic congestion.

In its approach to the problems of physical deterioration and population decline in Charlestown, the Boston Redevelopment Authority emphasizes a strengthening of the residential community. By removing the "El" to provide new rapid transit service near the Prison Point Bridge and by routing through traffic along the edges of the area, traffic circulation should be improved at the same time as it is removed from residential streets. The establishment of a Community College on the site of the railroad yards and Old State Prison as well as the removal of industry detrimental to a residential community should stimulate housing improvement on older sites as well as on cleared land in new areas such as the Little Mystic Channel project.

Despite the industrial development in Charlestown, much of the area retains its 19th century character as a residential town. The combination of wood frame and brick row houses forms a continuous but varied facade along many narrow streets. The dense arrangement of buildings is broken by areas of open space such as the Old Burial Ground, the Training Field, Monument Square, John Harvard Mall, school playgrounds, or irregular intersections such as City Square and Thompson Square. In this context, the maintenance of older structures is an important complement to new building construction, changing economic conditions, and reorganizing traffic patterns. Many Charlestown residences and commercial and public buildings from the late 18th through late 19th centuries are architecturally significant buildings, ~~where~~

by the large number of such buildings and
Their value is increased by their arrangement in groups and rows. Rehabilitation
of these structures in keeping with their original design will
preserve the historic character of Charlestown and enrich its
growing environment.



Illustrations to accompany topographical history of Charlestown

colonial view of the town (1743)

18th century (Revolutionary War) map of Boston Harbor -- Charlestown area

Revolutionary War map by British Lieutenant Page of the Battle of
Bunker Hill

view of original Charles River Bridge (Charlestown Bridge) (1789)

1818 map of Charlestown

19th century view of City Square

Training Field in the 20th century

1834 plan of Monument Square

1839 plan of Monument Square

20th century view of Monument Square

1885 map of Charlestown

20th century view of the Town Hill

20th century aerial photograph of Charlestown

